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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: A/S GORDON MEETS LEADERS FROM ACROSS
POLITICAL SPECTRUM

REF: TBILISI 1069

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary: On June 10, A/S Gordon met with Speaker David Bakradze, United National Movement (ruling party) MPs, Parliamentary opposition MPs, and non-parliamentary leaders. Speaker Bakradze explained the GoG's strategy in dealing with the ongoing protests and the history behind street politics in Georgia. He detailed the GoG's plan for further democratic reforms. Christian Democratic Movement (CDM) parliamentary opposition leader Giorgi Targamadze explained why he was in the opposition despite agreeing with the GoG on a number of issues, and expressed his view that both the non-parliamentary opposition and GoG had to take significant steps towards political compromise. Non-parliamentary leader Levan Gachechiladze expressed his disappointment with his June 9 meeting with President Saakashvili while Nino Burjanadze steadfastly refused to negotiate with the GoG. All leaders expressed their thanks for A/S Gordon's message that the U.S. would continue to support Georgia's territorial integrity, Euro-Atlantic aspirations, and would not sacrifice Georgia's interests to further our efforts to "reset" our relationship with Russia. End Summary.

Bakradze Details GoG Democratization Plan

¶2. (C) Speaker Bakradze described the current domestic political situation by explaining Georgia's long history with street politics. Bakradze noted that every president of post-Soviet Georgia, including Saakashvili, has come to power through street actions -- meaning that, for many Georgians, street protests are a normal part of political life. In fact, many who were leading the street actions of the past few months had come to power with Saakashvili during the Rose Revolution and they hoped to repeat the same success. Bakradze said that the non-parliamentary opposition's zero sum view of the situation was also a hallmark of Georgian politics since independence. Bakradze acknowledged the lack of trust in political processes, and said that the GoG understood that further political reforms were needed to bring politics from the street into Parliament. Bakradze lamented the lack of political responsibility and accountability that allowed protest leaders to make wild, irresponsible statements without consequences. He said that it was time to "change the rules" and reject zero sum game politics. He steadfastly affirmed that the GoG would not pursue short term tactical compromises. Bakradze detailed the numerous efforts the GoG had made before and during the protests to try to come to some sort of compromise, all of which have been rejected. Bakradze said he understood the predicament in which the non-parliamentary opposition currently found itself. Bakradze explained that they had backed themselves into a unrealistic corner by focusing solely on Saakashvili's resignation. Bakradze said after issuing outlandish statements, it was difficult to move forward with dialogue, but noted that the GoG was still committed to help non-parliamentary leaders find a face saving way out.

¶3. (C) Bakradze said the GoG had finally decided to move ahead on its reform agenda and expressed disappointment that the non-parliamentary opposition had rejected both the opportunity to lead in reform (for example, by proposing the idea of the constitutional reform commission) and to engage in real dialogue. Bakradze said that the political dynamic was positive citing virtually all non-parliamentary leaders' newfound willingness to accept some sort of dialogue which they had previously rejected out of hand. Bakradze explained the newly created Constitutional Commission's makeup and goals (ref A) and his hope that some sort of draft constitution could be agreed upon within 12-18 months.

Bakradze also hoped the electoral law working group would have a draft for Parliament to consider by the fall. He acknowledged GoG failings, notably the crackdown on November 9, 2007 and said that the GoG had learned that it needed to incorporate dissenting voices into the political process. Bakradze cited the GoG's relationship with the parliamentary opposition as a success, but stated that much more needed to be done to incorporate more radical voices into a normalized political framework. Bakradze said that some bumps were unavoidable as the GoG transitioned from state-building to institution-building over the course of the last five years. Bakradze fully agreed with A/S Gordon's remarks that further democratic reforms were Georgia's only path to minimize political radicalism.

Parliamentary Opposition Leaders Speak Up

¶4. (C) MPs Gia Tortladze (Strong Georgia) and Paata Davitaia (We Ourselves) answered A/S Gordon's question as to whether the ruling party had indeed learned lessons in the

affirmative. Davitaia and Tortladze, who both participated in the November 9, 2007 protests, said that before that event, the GoG had listened to nobody. Both expressed their satisfaction that while they were a small minority, they now had a "seat at the table" and were relevant to decision-making in Georgia. Davitaia said that he had been a protester in 2007 because the GoG had rejected dialogue, compromise, and political inclusion. He continued saying that the situation has changed very much and explained his decision to take his Parliamentary mandate. Davitaia simply stated that political dialogue and inclusion were his only goals whereas others are still pursuing an "unrealistic political jackpot" of succeeding in getting another Rose Revolution. Davitaia confirmed Bakradze's statement that President Saakashvili had made numerous significant offers to the non-parliamentary opposition which have all been rejected. (Embassy Note: Davitaia was a key liaison between Gachechiladze and Saakashvili and reportedly helped arrange the recent meeting between the two. End Note.) When asked by the Assistant Secretary, Tortladze and Davitaia explained their significant domestic policy differences with the GoG and both noted that they were more hawkish on foreign policy than the GoG itself.

¶5. (C) CDM leader Targamadze said that his foreign policy views almost fully coincide with those of the GoG. He mildly criticized Saakashvili for falling into a trap on August 7, 2008, but called the incident minor in a 200 year history of Russian attempts to occupy and destabilize Georgia. However, Targamadze used August 7, 2008, as an example of what he viewed as the most significant problem Georgia faces; that decision-making power is almost exclusively vested in the hands of one individual. Targamadze explained that his political goal was to change the system away from personalities towards institutions and to improve checks and balances which Targamadze said virtually did not exist. Targamadze lamented the anti-western turn the protest rallies had taken and said a so-called neutral policy was effectively pro-Russian. On the media, Targamadze estimated that newspapers were 80 percent anti-government and said that he believed were under heavy Russian influence. He said that access to television for opposition figures was widespread and not a legitimate media criticism. According to

Targamadze, a lack of professional standards and a pro-GoG editorial policy at the largest three stations -- Rustavi 2, Imedi, and the Public Broadcaster -- created an uneven, pro-GoG slanted media environment. Targamadze characterized Maestro and Kavkasia as blatant non-parliamentary propaganda outlets.

¶6. (C) Targamadze said that he could not support the radical aims of the non-parliamentary opposition which only serve to destabilize Georgia and hurt its interests, but said that the GoG needed to take concrete steps to restore public trust. He listed replacing the Central Election Commission Chair and the Federal Communications Chair with trusted individuals as two easy first steps. Having made public commitments, Targamadze said the GoG needed to be serious about the electoral law working group and Constitutional Commission, otherwise protests in the fall would be much larger. He criticized the GoG's social and economic policies as leaving many citizens disaffected. Targamadze stressed that the GoG should devote its efforts into creating a stable middle class which he viewed as a bulwark against radicalism. Qmiddle class which he viewed as a bulwark against radicalism.

Targamadze explained that it was entirely understandable that economically disaffected people who had little incentive in maintaining the status quo and stability supported immediate, radical change.

Non-Parliamentary Opposition Explains Position

¶7. (C) Nino Burjanadze, Levan Gachechiladze, and Irakli Alasania explained their views on the current political environment. Gachechiladze said that he was disappointed with his June 9 meeting with Saakashvili and did not trust him. He went on to say that Georgia under Saakashvili was similar to a communist police state; broadcast media was GoG propaganda; prior parliamentary and presidential elections were falsified; and that Saakashvili was responsible for the August War. Burjanadze agreed with these points and added that Putin wanted Saakashvili to remain as president. She said Saakashvili had "sold" strategic assets to Russia and had violated every one of his promises to develop Georgia as a democratic nation. Alasania (who also had a brief pull aside with A/S Gordon) remained largely silent and expressed a desire to engage in dialogue, a notion that both Gachechiladze and Burjanadze rejected. Burjanadze indicated that Alasania was naive if he thought he could negotiate with Saakashvili. When asked, Burjanadze could not articulate an alternative potentially acceptable solution to the current impasse other than continued protests to force Saakashvili's resignation. She expressed her opinion that if Saakashvili

did not resign, Georgia risked civil war.

All Agree on Territorial Integrity

¶8. (C) Across the political spectrum, A/S Gordon's remarks that the U.S. would continue to support Georgia's territorial integrity, NATO aspirations, and that the U.S. would not sacrifice Georgia's territorial integrity and independence for better relations with Russia were welcomed. A/S Gordon's comment that he understood that being flexible on Georgia would not bring further Russian concessions, but rather only entice Russia to be more aggressive and obstinate was met with complete agreement by the Georgian side at the parliamentary lunch. Giorgi Targamadze told Poloff that he was reassured that the new administration would continue its policies and that a "reset" in relations with Russia would not come at the expense of Georgia. Likewise, Burjanadze, Gachechiladze, and Alasania expressed gratitude for the visit and A/S Gordon's commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity and further democratic development.

¶9. (U) Assistant Secretary Gordon did not have an opportunity to clear on this cable before departing Tbilisi.
TEFFT